

# The Christmas Eve

## PRIZE CHRISTMAS STORY.

Emily  
Clowes  
Burke



THE Persian roses had long since given their perfume to the air of the desert to refresh the weary camel-driver, and their petals to the scattering wind to heap the poet's tomb—for it was the twelfth month of the Mohammedan year in which is observed a divine institution, having for its authority the Koran:

"And proclaim to the people a pilgrimage; let them come to Thee on foot, and on every fleet camel, arriving by every deep defile.

"This do, and he that respecteth the sacred ordinance of God, this will be best for him with the Lord."

Night was passing. The stars were going out one by one, and the nightingale's song plaintive of sorrow was hushed. Murky darkness still flooded the pass guarding the approach of the desert. Dull tones from the heavy copper bells of the dromedaries quattered for the night in the far distance open, carried the signal to a rude hamlet among the hills that the caravan train would be starting ere daylight.

A rising from long and silent prayer in response to this call, two lone watchers, like those of old heeding the star of Bethlehem, stole down from an upper chamber and out into the melting gloom. Merwan, the rug-maker, was the first to break the solemn and consecrated watch.

"The night has fled and the hour is at hand, Kizami," said he to the young pilgrim, "and it is well. And thou wilt return ere the season of roses approacheth, when I must away. Aye, thou wilt return in time, for an angel voice whispered it while I yet prayed. Hasten ye Kizami, perform thy pilgrimage, and thy sins forgiven thee, ask pardon of God for mine, and it shall be granted. And, oh, my young pilgrim, by the beautiful word of the holy Koran, I shall be as pure as the day I was born!" And Merwan, in ecstasy, lifted his eyes and hands to the sky now taking on the silvery hue of the dawn.

"Thy face is even as an angel's now, my sainted Merwan, but tell me, wherein lies thy sin?"

"Ah, I have sinned, Kizami! I have had longings to remain; I have bewailed my fate to my God, and pleaded with him to make me whole, and fill my cup of human bliss; to crown my manhood, and grant unto me mine earthly heritage."

"By the sins of the fathers, given in the book of the Nestorians, is not thine earthly heritage the blight in the rose?"

"Aye, the blight in the rose visited upon me. But that is not my worst sin."

"Thy sin, then, Merwan?"

"Pleading with God for that which is not in His Koran. But haste ye, Kizami, I would see thee through the pass and on thy way."

Darkness was beginning to vanish. The lark, already amid the dawning clouds, was calling to the morn. Streaks of gray were chasing the shadows of the desert, as the sandaled feet of a turbaned hermit and pilgrim pressed the sands of its border. Neither had spoken as they paced the trail through the high and narrow walls, to the gateway, shutting out the storm, the heat, the fear, and the dread of its immeasurable stretches.

In prayer stood Merwan with closed eyes and hands outstretched to the westward, where Kizami was about to depart on his pilgrimage. So long did the rug-maker remain motionless, that a rosy light began flooding the caravan of the hills, and Kizami, buoyant of spirit and with youth burning in his light and active body, plucked at the sleeve of the worshipper, at the same time craving his patience. Merwan gazed upon him with grave sweetness, bidding him speak.

"Merwan, I must away, yet, for mine own enlightenment, I would fain know thine earthly heritage. I will guard it as my soul."

Merwan smiled in sweet forgiveness of the other's earnestness, and about to speak, was turning his misty eyes across the sands, when he clutched the youth's arm and exclaimed:

"O, look ye!"

It was only the simple picture of a mother and child, with the dawn-shadowed plain for its back-ground, and for its halo, the rosy blush of the morning. She was riding a sturdy ass, and with veil thrown back, nursing the babe at her breast, while her husband in the characteristic rusty brown gown and white turban, was holding the bride and glancing back with fondness upon his family. The desert waste was gray and chill in the dawn, yet warm and glowing with life and devotion and breathing of fruition. It was the divine story in human characters. The story is growing old, but every century hears its mystic calling and gains new life and power. It is still and must forever be the joy of the world. Let earth rise with it, then, and live.

The healing vision of the Holy maternity passed, Merwan drew a hand across his eyes as though he had but slept and dreamed.

"Man's holy heritage," he murmured, and then suddenly turning to the pilgrim he said:

"Kizami, I asked God for that!"

From the distant village literally founded upon the sands divers noises were being borne upward and outward upon the air, proclaiming all things animate and inanimate that go for the making of a pilgrimage, in the process of activity prior to the start.

Shouts, hoists, grunts, pulls, tugs, shoves, kicks and punches, gave signal that loads were being lifted to the backs of animals, adjusted and tied. As quickly passed the face of that young mother beneath her impenetrable veil at sight of the two strangers, as quickly fled the deep impressiveness of the moment at the infinite variety of sound and jargon, discordant and inarticulate.

"All that is mine is thine, Kizami," said Merwan at parting.

"All? You don't mean?"

"Yes, all; save that upon which my hands are busy. The Mullah will know, and have care of that in the holy hour; but—go! Nor tarry, nor forget ye the hour of roses. Go! and God be mindful of thee. Glory to Allah!"

A moment later and the young pilgrim was in the midst of the passing caravan—a motley assembly of camels, mules, and donkeys; muleteers, pilgrims, and camel-drivers—creeping away to the westward, while in the east and over all the sun was reigning.

Far away, yet ever near, high above rolling hills and surrounding plain, loomed Noah's mountain, Ararat; crowned with clouds and robed in rosy snow, soft-tinted by the sun; lonely, grand, and solitary; "a fitting place for the resting of the ark at the solemn death hour of an older race and the birth of a new generation."

It was a holy day. Priests were praying in the mosques, pilgrims wending their way to Mecca, shepherds like those of old calling to their flocks, each one by name, as they huddled together in the open places of the snow. The winter was present, and the spring far away, yet the sunshine while tempered by clouds, was imparting a touch of the soft season with its light and life and joy.

Merwan, the rug-maker, immovable as a bronze statue, gazed long to the westward till the creeping pilgrimage melted into the desert. Then back through the hills to his hamlet and loom he passed, with the bearing of a Persian prince.

"O, perfect day!" he murmured ecstatically, "wherein it is enough for me to know God's will is being done!"

The spirit of the spring was quickening in the land of the Magi. Soft gales were dissolving the mountain snows and the landscape glimmered in raiment new and radiant. In the lowlands, the peasants were turning the soil with their plows. The purring of a Persian water wheel carried the tidings of swollen rivers dispensing their blessings to valley and plain. The liquid notes of a bird floating high among the green and purple hills, thrilled the air with its joy of new-born wings, while the wild perfume of an early flower stirred the sense with its message of a second birth.

The winter had passed. All nature was throbbing with the unseen forces of immortal life.

It was the hour of midday devotion. Upon his prayer rug, with his pale forehead touching the floor, Merwan, the weaver, knelt in long and silent supplication. Within that sanctuary, where tapestries of unimaginable beauty covered the crude walls, the vast solitude of the desert seemed to abide, filled with soul and with heaven all about; populace of abundant life in light and color, cloud and mist, sun, moon, and stars, and thought companions. It was a shrine where angels might descend to watch over a soul left alone like a lamb on the plain.

A familiar step aroused the suppliant, and a Mullah, the faithful priest of the prophet, darkened the portal.

"By the heart and soul of the founder of the faith, may Allah chasten thee in pain," the holy one gave greeting and particular blessing.

"Glory to Allah! and His will be done," murmured Merwan, still prostrate.

From the Koran the Mullah chanted:

"Angels come among you by day and by night; when those of the night ascend to heaven, God asks them how they left his creatures." And what of thee, Merwan, thou lone one; what answer can they give of thee—we found him in prayer, in prayer we left him!"

"By the faith of Islam, yes."

"Two angels watch upon each mortal, one on the right, one on the left. At the close of each day they fly up to heaven with a written report. Every good action is recorded ten times by the angel at the right; and if the mortal commit a sin, the same angel says to the one on the left, 'Forbear ye for seven hours to record it; peradventure, he may repent and pray and obtain forgiveness.' And what of thee, son; dost thou repent ere the seventh hour and pray?"

"Thy servant prayeth always ere the seventh hour."

"By the scrupulous cleanliness of the prophet, doth thou perform ablution before each prayer?"

"For the cleanliness of my soul, do I perform ablution for the cleanliness of my body."

From the Holy Book the Mullah concluded with a prayer:

"God! There is no God but He the living, the ever living. He sleepeth not, neither doth He slumber. To Him belongeth the heavens and the earth and all that they contain. Who shall intercede with Him unless by His permission? He knoweth the past and the future, but no one can comprehend His knowledge but that which He revealeth. He is the High, the Mighty."

"Glory to Allah!"

"Arise, thou believer, and by the heart of Mahomet, may thou knowest God's mercy."

Though pure barbarian by birth, yet with the grace and peaceful majesty of a prince, did Merwan, the rug-maker, sit before his crude loom in the doorway, weaving a wondrous fabric. His delicate, high-bred face wore an expression of aloofness from the world; his eyes, dark and deep, unfathomably deep, bespoke a soul within a sacred portal; his hair was black and curled around the rim of his snowy turban.

Upon the ground opposite, the descendant of the prophet was squatting upon his heels, seeming to muse, yet watching with wary interest the busy fingers before him.

As precious as a Persian carpet, a beautiful cat upon a footstool, like Persia revealed on the map, blinked in the sunshine; perplexed and uncertain of balance, with furry back twitching uneasily; dozing, yet wide awake, in seeming mistrust of the Mullah, even as Persia of Russia.

The stillness that followed the prayer was broken by Merwan the weaver:

"While I yet prayed in the night hour, a filmy scarf veiled before me, dazzled my eyes with the brightness of its characters unto me written: 'In that hour when thy soul is gently drawn from thy pale lips as the silken veil from the face of one beloved, oh, the mystery and charm in the revelation!'"

The Mullah started as one falling out of a dark dream, into the searching light of day. The cat shifted. The sun was not more radiant than the face above the threads, the knots, and the nervous fingers.

"By the fascinating smile of the prophet, thine is even as a ray of the spirit, shining in purity and brightness. God hath given thee this resignation ere thine hour approacheth. Blessed art thou in thy consecration!"

The cat was purring of pety, roguery, sanctity at once interchangeable.

Merwan continued the message set forth in gold letters:

"When the petals of the roses have hidden Omar's shrine, man shall envy thy quiet grave veiled beneath thine own roses woven in splendor and gold."

And Merwan, the weaver, caressed his rare fabric now nearing completion.

"Aye, 'tis a thing of rare beauty," the Mullah responded, "and worthy the grave of a righteous believer."

"Thou shalt enter the golden gateway into thy heavenly Mecca, and thy soul shall be white as the wheaten flour, and fragrant with perfume. Sweeter than the spicy gales of Saba shall the air be cooled by sparkling fountains, and resounding with the melodious voice of that singing angel, Israfil!"

"Upon thee be peace in the name of Allah the Merciful."

Resplendent being shalt thou be, free from human defect and pain, and endowed with youth and thy beauty; and loving, aye, better after thy spiritual eyes have beheld the glories in heaven.

Thus was setting in gold and purple splendor ere the Mullah had finished his priestly calling of preparing the soul about to separate from the world and enter upon its futurity. Each mountain height was robed in the royal blue and crowned with fiery gold. A mantle of wonderful color enveloped the dingy hamlet while a shaft of shining light fell upon weaver and loom, and flashing beyond, transformed hangings and rugs into a garden of glory, all of which was not lost to the keen, sweeping glance of the prophet's trusty disciple. The cat arched his back and then huddled, holding his own on his feet, as like Persia, studying the hug of the Big Polar Bear, to spring at the Mullah, should he attempt to make sacrilegious advance on the sacred possessions of Merwan, his master.

But he waddled away, the fat Mullah, his loose robe wrapping a bosom impenetrable, leaving his one sheep alone on the mountain, save for pussy, who purled in the lap of a maiden, a few tame chickens, and a goat, a fanatic; and pondered, no doubt, like a Persian, as to where his possessions began or where they would come to an end.

As for Merwan, he stroked his fond pet, and smiled a grave smile, which flickered a moment and then went out like a candle.

No-Ruz, "new day" or the Persian New Year, was nearing its end. The spirit of its celebration had been entered into with as much solemnity, enthusiasm, and merriment as in the day of Hamza al-Bashid.

Alone with his thoughts and his angels, the weaver worked on in the gloaming.

"The hour of roses approacheth," he murmured, just as a happy voice out of the shadow gave answer.

"Merwan, thy pilgrim returneth."

"Kizami! Glory to Allah!"

"Peace be unto thee, believer, for in the name of God's chosen, I bring thee back from Mecca, a conqueror, a victor, a hero!"

"Now, wait! I His holy pleasure to depart in the care of His angels, Kizami, Kizami! God love thee! To see thee before me, fills all my soul with joy and thanksgiving. And rug-maker and pilgrim wept and laughed together as breast met breast in youthful demonstration.

Now heed me well, Kizami," said Merwan, then all the joyous details of the pilgrimage had been told over many times within the hamlet. "While yet you hastened in the twilight, and ere the faithful Mullah had departed with his blessing, I, your master, your Persian mentor, crouched upon my knee, and timely admonition gave in purrings deep and strange. All that's mine is thine."

In my loom now nears completion. All these written pages of my life and soul and fingers, all these lovely children of my thoughts, and heart's desire, this maze of rich designing in deep and symbol language. All that stands for fleeting, finite beauty, all that stands for life, its hidden meaning and its glory. All that I have mastered, and my people long be-

"Glory to Allah!"

"Arise, thou believer, and by the heart of Mahomet, may thou knowest God's mercy."

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fore me. All that mystery lurking in the desert, on the mountain, in the vines and trees and flowers, in the roses and the secret. All that stands for Delty. His nearness and His power. All that stands for change, and the bliss of the hereafter! All is thine, Kizami, but—listen to a warning. Somewhere in a land beyond the hills there lies a strange faith. I warn thee ere the last hour of my sleep within this hamlet—to—

To thee, that far distant dwelling."

The footfall of the Mullah jarred upon the evening stillness.

"Even now His angels He sendeth down from the celestial regions," crooned the holy servant.

After silent prayer the weaver murmured:

"It wanteth but little to rend asunder the veil of the heavens that I may enter into that garden of roses, where my weary hands and feet may be cool among the sweet petals."

"Glory to Allah!"

When the priest spoke again, it was by the word of the Prophet that he would return before midnight. And as he departed Kizami stole into that hallowed hamlet, embracing the passing young weaver.

"God love thee, Kizami. Over my heart lies the secret that blesses my work and protects it—crucity. Now heed me; as precious and clear as the pool of the Prophet. To weave it among my loved roses shall be the last task of my fingers."

"May the angels precede thee and guard thee, I ask in the name of the Mighty," Kizami.

"God love thee, Kizami, and listen: the time is growth short, by the Persian sun, but not by crinity. Now heed me; a voice in the night has changed all my heart, and am I turned Christian!"

"Merwan: thou wanderest."

"Yes! my Master! In the lone watches, an angel voice has been singing a sweet, strange lullaby, of love new-born, of a dimpled form born to bear the burdens of the world, and protect it—crucity. Now heed me; as precious and clear as the pool of the Prophet. To weave it among my loved roses shall be the last task of my fingers."

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